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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 DHAKA 000237

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [KDEM](#) [BG](#)  
SUBJECT: MEETING WITH HOME SECRETARY KARIM

Classified By: DCM Geeta Pasi; Reason 1.4(d)

¶1. (C) Summary. In a wide-ranging meeting the Charge d'Affaires a.i. and the Home Secretary discussed USG concerns over recent changes in Bangladesh's visa regime for visitors, U.S.- GOB counterterrorism cooperation, the recent wave of anti-corruption arrests, allegations of police torture, the sedition case of Bangladeshi journalist Shoaib Chowdhury, trafficking in persons, the continuation of "cross-fire" killings by the Rapid Action Battalion, and the status of several investigations, including the Kibria investigation. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) On February 8, the Charge d'Affaires a.i., along with the Resident Legal Advisor (RLA) and poloff (note taker), called on new Home Secretary Mohammed Abdul Karim.

Visas  
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¶3. (SBU) The CDA a.i. raised concern about recent changes in the Bangladesh visa regime for foreign visitors, including an onerous registration and exit permit system. Karim noted he had heard complaints from other missions and a recent inter-ministerial group had met to discuss the matter. He agreed with the principle of visa reciprocity and promised to "simplify" the registration and exit permit requirement to allow visitors to complete this formally at the airport. He noted, however, these new procedures would require amendments to an old law and would "take some time." He agreed to look into a separate problem regarding American journalists based in India waiting for up to a month to obtain visas.

Security Cooperation  
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¶4. (S) Karim welcomed our offer to work together to enhance public awareness of, and support, for U.S. and GOB objectives on counterterrorism. He accepted a nonpaper on this issue but asked for a formal letter outlining the opportunities.

¶5. (S) The CDA a.i. noted that USG experts had conducted an assessment of the Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) recently with the goal of offering assistance to enhance Bangladesh border enforcement. Karim acknowledged he is aware of the program and that the GOB has given it the "green signal" to move forward.

¶6. (C) We thanked Karim for the his Ministry's traditionally

strong security support for USG interests in Bangladesh noting that the USG would be offering additional Anti-Terrorism Training (ATA) courses to police. Referring to a recent diplomatic note requesting police capacity building training from the United States, CDA a.i. asked Karim about GOB's priorities on the long list of areas of interest. Karim promised to get back to us later on priorities and asked if we could include training for senior policy makers at other ministries besides Home.

#### Corruption Arrests

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¶17. (C) The media have exaggerated the numbers of mass arrests during this anti-corruption drive, Karim said. He added that some of the thousands of people arrested were from the Awami League's national blockade program. The police are only looking for "big fish," those who have amassed illicit wealth. According to the law, he said, detainees can be held for up to 120 days. "If we fail to prepare proper cases against them in that time, even during this State of Emergency, they will be set free." The crackdown, he added, will last as long as it takes to get the job done.

¶18. (C) Citing a recently published photo of a detainee suspended from a ceiling fan in a police station and reports of custodial deaths the CDA a.i. underscored our concern over this these incidents. Karim said that the four officers in the ceiling fan photo were immediately placed on suspension and described them as "criminals."

#### Trafficking in Persons

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¶19. (C) Noting our desire to maintain strong cooperation with the Home Ministry on trafficking in persons, Karim said that trafficking remains a government priority, but further efforts are needed in this area. There have been recent improvements in stopping trafficking across the border into India, he said.

#### Shoaib Chowdhury

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¶10. (C) The CDA a.i. briefed Karim on the strong USG interest in the situation of Bangladeshi journalist Shoaib Chowdhury, whose sedition case has attracted significant interest in the U.S. the EU, and Canada. She underscored the importance of according Chowdhury due process, and expressed appreciation for the Ministry's prior efforts to assure Chowdhury's security. Karim was unfamiliar with this case, and promised to investigate the matter.

#### Rapid Action Battalion

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¶11. (C) The Rapid Action Battalion's "cross-fire killings" are a long-standing USG concern and the CDA a.i. urged the GOB to condemn and end extra-judicial killings. She noted the potential possibility of engaging with the RAB in the areas of human rights and professional development but that "cross-fires" are a major obstacle. Karim took the point, saying that "Don't laugh, but now the cross-fires are called "'encounters.'" He dismissed the recent Human Rights Watch report on RAB as "not correct," and said RAB is preparing a rejoinder. He said he told RAB commanders to arrest, not kill, suspects.

#### Anti-Corruption and Investigatory Assistance

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¶12. (C) The CDA a.i. noted that the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) provided extensive training in money laundering and terrorist financing to Criminal Investigation Division

(CID) police officers. The RLA added she hopes to set-up a task force from the Bangladesh Bank's Anti-Money Laundering department, CID officers, and attorneys to handle these cases. Karim said the GOB is determined to develop a new, comprehensive anti-corruption law. He agreed with the RLA's assessment that prosecutors and police working in tandem could more efficiently develop and process cases, and "we are serious about improving the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC)."

#### Kibria Investigation

¶13. (C) When asked if the GOB is considering reopening investigations of the 2005 murder of Awami Leaguer Shah Kibria or the 2004 grenade attack during an Awami League rally, Karim said he and the Chief Advisor are aware of the need to address these issues. He noted that there has yet to be an arrest in the attack against Kibria. He said the 2004 attack is being investigated. RLA reminded the advisor that the FBI had participated in the investigation.

#### JMB

¶14. (C) Asked for an assessment of the intentions and residual strength of Jamaatul Mujahidin Bangladesh (JMB), Karim affirmed that pursuing JMB remains a top Bangladeshi priority. He was not aware of any current specific threats but "it's an assumption they could create problems in the diplomatic area." As for the convicted six JMB leaders on death row, he said that they would have been executed on February 17 were it not for their petitions for mercy. However, he said, "mercy petitions are hardly ever approved, maybe one in a million. After the President makes his decision, the execution will take place within 21 days." In fact, he added, there has only been one approved mercy petition in the history of Bangladesh.

¶15. BIO NOTE: Karim joined the Home Ministry in December 2006 from his position as Chairman of the National Board of Revenue. Karim drew from his experience at the National Board of Revenue and was well aware of the financial investigations we raised. He has served in the Ministry of Commerce as its Secretary and in the Ministry of Defense.

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